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ABSTRACT

Three couples, parents of underachieving high school students, and three counselors participated in a fifteen hour marathon counseling session. This session followed a year of weekly group counseling meetings of 1-1/2 hours duration. The marathon session was video-taped and the results were examined by the counselors. Six stages of group development were identified: (1) initial anxiety, (2) hostility directed towards counselors and others in the group, (3) commitment to a purpose, (4) return to surface level topics. (5) basic encounters and group catharsis, and (6) separation anxiety. The evaluation of the session by the participants indicated that the experience was an emotionally intense one for each of them, and some of the members reported behavioral pattern changes in themselves or their spouses. The research reported herein was funded under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. (Author)

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# A MARATHON COUNSELING SESSION FOR PARENTS OF UNDERACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Three couples, parents of underachieving high school students, and three counselors participated in a fifteen hour marathon counseling session. This session followed a year of weekly group counseling meetings of 1½ hours duration. The marathon session was video-taped and the results were examined by the counselors. Six stages of group development were identified: (1) initial anxiety, (2) hostility directed towards counselors and others in the group, (3) commitment to a purpose, (4) return to surface level topics, (5) basic encounters and group catharsis and (6) separation anxiety.

The evaluation of the session by the participants indicated that the experience was an emotionally intense one for each of them, and some of the members reported behavioral pattern changes in themselves or their spouses.

## A Review of the Literature

In his paper, the "Process of the Basic Encounter Group", Rogers identifies the elements which he considers common to the group process: (1) a period of milling around when each person talks about things which are important to him and does not really listen to what other people say, (2) a resistance to personal expression or exploration, (3) a description of past feelings, (4) an expression of negative feelings, (5) an expression and exploration of personally meaningful material, (6) the expression of immediate personal feelings in the group, (7) the development of a healing capacity in the group, (8) self acceptance and the beginning of change, (9) the breaking down of masks, (10) giving feedback to each individual, (11) confrontations, (12) a helping relationship in which members can fully experience emotions and feelings with other members of the group, (13) an expression of positive feelings and closeness, and (14) changes in behavior in and out of the group.

Mintz (1967) identifies four stages of group process as observed in a marathon or extended session: (1) the beginning phase is a working through of anxiety about the marathon itself; (2) the hostile phase incorporates anger at the therapist and then between members of the group; (3) the dependency phase occurs as the people express a deep appreciation of each other through physical and verbal contact and finally; (4) show separation anxiety. There is much fluctuation back and forth between the open hostility stage and the dependency stage.

## Description of the Population

This paper is a description of the experiences which nine people (three married couples and three counselors) encountered during a 15 hour marathon group counseling session, as well as the mechanics which were involved.

In each case the behavior of their children both in school and at home caused these parents to seek counseling. Prior to the extended session two of the couples had been a part of the group for seventy-six counseling hours, and the third couple had been in the group for twelve counseling hours. The group had met weekly for two hours per session during their first five months. There was a ten week break for summer vacation, and then they resumed meeting for one and a half hours a week. During the first 36 hours one counselor was present; two counselors were present during the next 26 hours and three counselors for the last 14 hours prior to the marathon session. The third counselor acted as the video technician for the video-taping which was taking place during the session and also participated as a counselor.

## Methods and Procedures

During the first 36 hours of group counseling, the parents spent most of the time discussing the problems of their children with occasional insights into their own roles with these problems. After the summer break, the parents decided that the real problem lay in their personal relationships to each other and gradually focused on themselves and their individual problems. As time progressed, these parents felt that 1½ hours a week was too short a period to cover the ground they felt they needed to cover. The beginnings of their sessions were taken up with surface material, and it wasn't until the latter part of each session that their more intense feelings could be dealt with. The counselors suggested that they plan to have an extended session during a weekend. The clients indicated a willingness to participate, and they also agreed to video-tape the session for future use and for professional counselor in-service education.

The third counselor (video technician) was introduced to the group seven sessions prior to the marathon in order for the group to feel at ease with the new member. He participated as a counselor for the first three sessions and as the cameraman for the next four. The group meeting place was changed to the school video studio, the equipment was operated, and each person had an opportunity to see and hear himself on television. The purpose of these activities was to acclimate the group members to their new surroundings. The counseling was conducted in the studio for the last four sessions preceeding the extended session. During these sessions group members appeared not to be aware of or concerned with the video equipment or process.

The group made all the physical preparations for the marathon. The women prepared warm-up dinners which were kept in the home economics lab next to the studio. The men set up the furniture and cleaned the studio after the meeting. Snacks and coffee were available throughout the session. The original length of the session was set for 12 hours beginning at 1:30 in the afternoon. Group members were free to get up and move around as they wished.

## The Marathon Experience

The session appeared to be divided into 6 distinct stages: (1) initial anxiety, (2) hostility directed toward counselors and others in the group, (3) commitment to their purpose, (4) return to surface level topics, (5) basic encounters and group catharsis, and (6) separation anxiety.

In the initial phase of the session, all of the members arrived on time. They talked of their concerns about being televised and the possibility of their being viewed by someone who knew them. They spoke of the possible dangers involved in the intense emotional experience they were anticipating. This stage lasted about one hour. It is interesting to note that these same

topics had already been dealt with at length in several of the preparatory sessions.

During the hostility stage, they expressed feelings of doubt about being able to talk for 12 hours. Some anger was expressed toward the counselors for suggesting the marathon. Other comments regarding the counselor role and competence were brought up and dealt with. The members felt safe in directing their fears concerning the sessions toward the counselors. The negativeness expressed at this time was an indication of the insecurity they felt towards one another and the sense of apprehension they were experiencing. This stage lasted approximately one hour. It was during this time that the third counselor was drawn into the group. He became so involved in the process that he switched roles from technician to counselor. No effort was made to change camera position. The counselor left the group only to change the video tapes.

The group recognized their efforts to resist the purposes they had set for themselves in an earlier session. One member began by discussing a problem between he and his wife. The group listened, offered suggestions, and then began confronting this man to explore his feelings and attitudes about his problem. They reached out and shared similar experiences and concerns. One couple who had been having marital difficulties and who began the meeting by sitting across the room from each other moved together and the husband put his arms around his wife. During the periods when the emotional tone of the group was tense, there was often physical contact between husbands and wives.

In between these periods of intense emotional encounter or when the focus of the conversation was being transferred from one member to another, the group seemed to go through a transitional period. It was during this time that members began to move around, switch seats, or get coffee. The

tone of the conversation was light and there was some kidding. In each transitional period it appeared that members had to express either hostility or anxiety before another problem focused discussion could be entered.

There was a break for dinner six hours after the beginning of the meeting. The women got together to warm up the food, and the men set up the table and chairs. Conversation in both sub-groups became light and very social. Little or no mention was made of the topics or feelings they had previously discussed.

After dinner the room was cleaned and serious talk resumed almost immediately. After a break period during which some anxiety and hostility were expressed, a bond of understanding seemed to be present, and there was a return to previously discussed topics on a much deeper emotional level than before. Peoples voices were lowered, members picked up many non-verbal cues, hidden agendas were exposed, and there was another period of sharing experiences and attitudes. At the end of 12 hours, the group decided that they had not accomplished what they wanted and decided to continue working into the morning on their unresolved agenda items.

At this point, there was a complete change in the emotional tone of the meeting. The counselors later felt that this stage was a warding off of something they knew intuitively was about to happen. One member told of a frustrating experience that occurred to him at work. The other members then became involved in moralizing over whether it was permissible to take one or two donuts from an office coffee lounge. The group became enrapt in this discussion and each member was anxious to express his feelings about this. Each time the counselors tried to refocus the discussion, they were thwarted and the group continued their surface talk. When one of the counselors offered a box of donuts to a member of the group, they recognized the ab-

surdity of their conversation. There was laughter and giggling and then a prolonged silence. Finally, one of the men indicated he was concerned that the group might adjourn before he was able to muster courage to talk about his problem. He began to cry and asked for help. Several members of the group encouraged his wife to respond to him. She could not. They asked him to put his arm around her. He did. She then reached for him and the two sat in each other's arms crying. The other two couples reacted with tears, reaching out to their spouses, and giving supportive comments to this couple. It was as if they all identified with and shared in the emotions presented by this couple - a basic encounter. This appeared to be the integration and the climax of a problem that had been presented in a piecemeal fashion by this couple much earlier in the evening. The group dealt with their own reactions, with the couple's reaction to one another, with their own understanding of the problem and feelings connected with it. Words were interrupted by long periods of silence. Much feeling was expressed non-verbally among the members. Everyone seemed aware of the unity of the group, the singleness of their feelings. As the emotional tone of the encounter diminished and the silences became more comfortable, the members remained seated. They felt it was time to leave but no one got up to go. A few of the members wanted another marathon later in the year, and the rest readily agreed. Each member expressed anxiety about the end of the meeting in his own way. As they were expressing these feelings, the group helped clean the meeting room and left.

## Client Evaluation

Three nights later the group met again at their regular meeting to discuss what had happened. There was a spontaneous and unsolicited response by expressing their feelings for one another and for the value of the group ex-

perience. One man said that he had never felt so free since he was a child. He left something of himself at the meeting which he never wanted to find again. Another man said he started to cry in church the next morning while he was listening to a gospel reading on love. Somehow this had new significance to him. One couple said that they were so excited and elated that they were unable to sleep and talked for two more hours after they returned home. Another couple who had not had sexual relations for over two years were now able to share this intimacy. They ascribed their behavior changes to the increasing sense of closeness, freedom and trust developed during the marathon.

The group decided to continue their weekly meetings to develop further sensitivity to themselves and each other.

## Counselor Evaluation

1. T.V. - In the initial phases the T.V. equipment probably hampered group involvement but it seemed to disappear after a short while. The tape can be used at a later date to show the members of the group how they look to others. Counselors have used these tapes to evaluate their own effectiveness and behavior under the stressful conditions of the session.
2. Food - The counselors felt that it would have been better to have had the dinner catered rather than prepared by the group as this preparation time tended to break the continuity of the meeting and formed temporary splinter groups.
3. Breaks - During dinner and on several occasions during the course of the session, a few of the members gathered in corners and formed small subgroups and took washroom breaks together. This activity seemed to interrupt the continuity of the meeting.
4. Personal involvement - The counselors felt that they became more person-

ally involved with the process during the latter part of the meeting. None of the counselors had ever before experienced the intensity of feelings in their clients or in themselves toward their clients.

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